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# The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Perkins County

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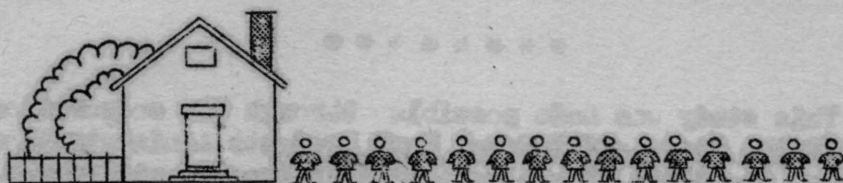
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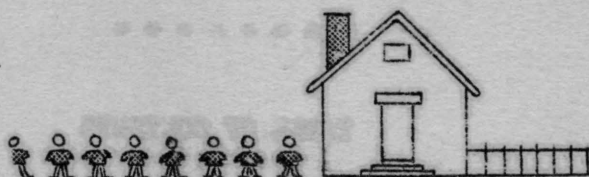
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in  
The Elementary Schools  
of  
Perkins County

W. F. Kunlien  
Howard M. Sauer  
C. Scandrette



In 1920, 1,496 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Perkins county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 730

Each figure represents 100 pupils

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Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of  
Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota

MIMEOGRAPH

## EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota Elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Perkins county leaders, by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution; as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

\* \* \* \* \*

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\* \* \* \* \*

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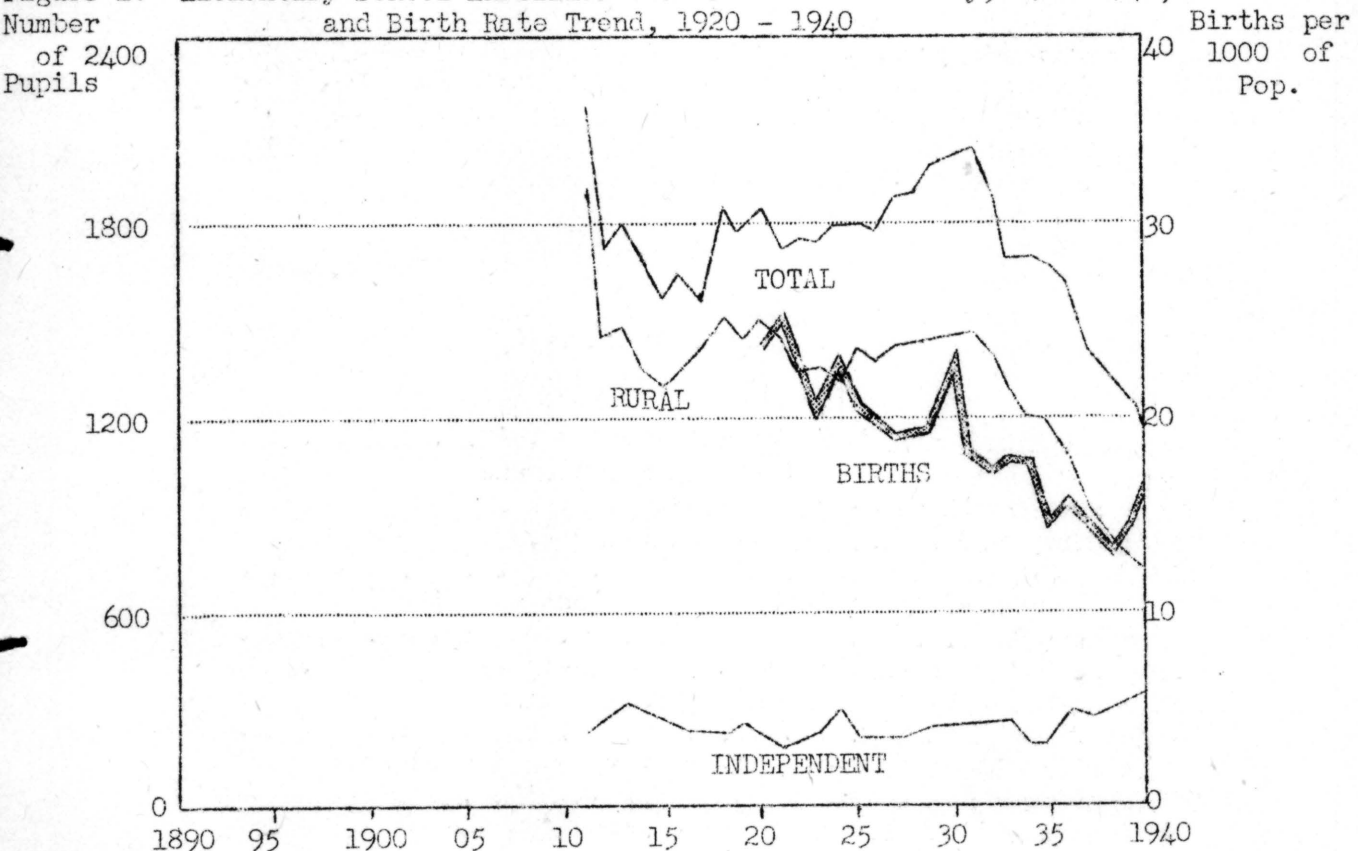
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## The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Perkins County

For a number of years population experts have been predicting that the downward trend of the birth rate would eventually cause a serious decline in the elementary enrollment. Figure 1 (below) indicates that there is a direct relation between the declining birth rate and decreasing elementary enrollments in Perkins county. Between 1911 and 1919 the total elementary enrollment decreased from 2,188 pupils to 1,799 pupils. From 1919 the enrollment increased gradually until it reached 2,039 in 1931. Between 1931 and 1940 enrollment dropped to 1,190 pupils, a loss of 40 percent. As is also shown in Figure 1, the enrollment of rural schools has decreased from the 1920 enrollment of 1,496 pupils to the 1940 enrollment of 730 pupils. Independent schools show a slight increase.

The trend in the Perkins county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that the birth rate declined, with some variations, from 24.1 births per 1000 persons in 1920 to 13.6 births per 1000 persons in 1938. By 1940 the birth rate had increased slightly to reach a rate of 17.3 births per 1000 of the population. The result of the downward tendency in the birth rate has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age.

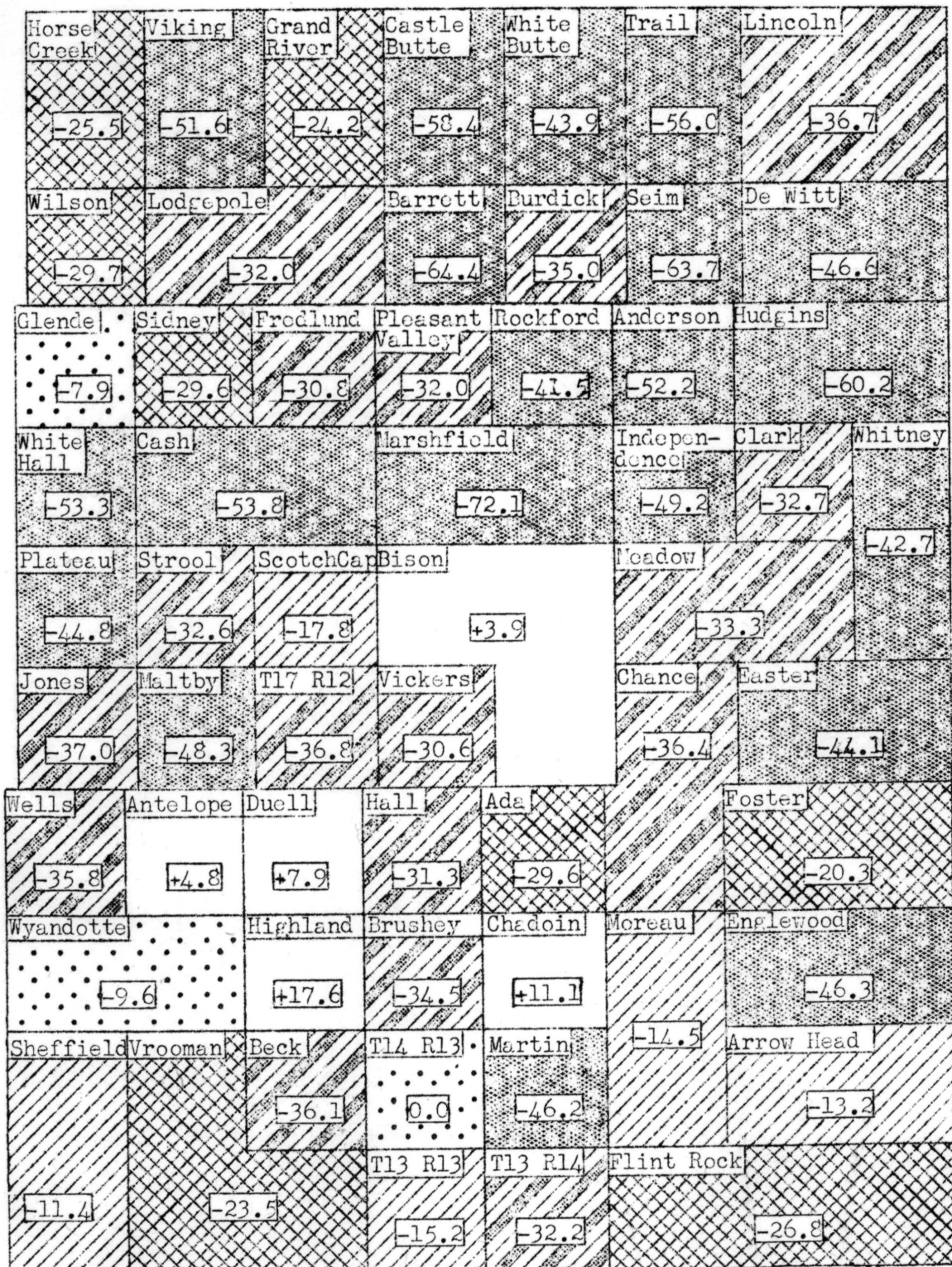
Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Perkins County, 1911-1940,  
and Birth Rate Trend, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
and Reports of the State Board of Health



Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Perkins County, 1930 - 1940



Legend:

	Gained		Lost 20.0 - 29.9%
	Lost 0.0 - 9.9%		Lost 30.0 - 39.9%
	Lost 10.0 - 19.9%		Lost 40.0% or more

Note: Map shows townships as of 1930—seven have been organized since

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

Another important factor in elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2, which records the loss of population by townships through outward migration. Perkins county lost approximately one-fourth of its population (24.5 percent) during the ten year period between 1930 and 1940. Losses have been quite general throughout the county, although as the figure indicates, losses have been particularly heavy in the northern half of the county. Three townships, Bison, Antelope and Duell showed gains but twenty townships lost over 40 percent of their population during this period.

Elementary enrollments throughout Perkins county dropped 40 percent during this period. These losses varied in the different townships but were consistently heavy in townships that showed the heaviest losses in population. In three townships where the loss in population averaged 62 percent the loss in elementary enrollments was 71 percent while in the three townships showing gains in population the loss in enrollments was only 6.5 percent. The fact that enrollments have fallen at a sharper rate than has the population and have also fallen in townships showing gains in population, indicates that the declining birth rate as well as outward migration are important factors in enrollment losses.

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Perkins County Districts  
1920, 1930 and 1940

(12)	(19)	(15)	(26)	(8)	(78)	Common Ind. 224 427		
68	19	17	43	(70)	(33)	(66)	574	
50	31	39	63	45	37	73		
45	14	10	10	20	51	39		
				16	9	23		
(47)	(20)	(4)	(59)	(39)	(2)	(75)	(74)	(34)
14	35	42	21	23	22	-	-	39
22	31	42	16	32	18	5	14	8
9	13	16	3	18	-	9	8	15
(46)	(58)	(29)	(60)	(40)	(57)	(42)		
12	16	17	18	62	22	29		
24	19	27	21	29	21	33		
21	10	21	17	11	7	-		
(3)	(27)	(76)	(41)	(71)	(21)	(23)		
15	23	-	23	-	32	61		
15	13	17	27	39	34	35		
6	-	9	-	8	6	26		
(56)	(25)	(5)	(6)	Bison Cons. 65 91	(7)	(22)	Grand Central Cons. 42 9	(24)
24	20	10	7	-	48	9		
26	35	20	19	19	70	16		
4	24	8	4	5	28	2		
(55)	(18)	(14)	(43)	(13)	(28)	(68)	(32)	
22	24	-	-	23	19	18	17	
35	22	33	26	17	23	11	25	
64	4	14	5	13	6	16	-	
(10)	(77)	(31)	(9)	(11)	(48)	(35)		
9	11	26	20	22	12	8		
6	(30)	9	13	18	10	9		
4	14	19	14	10	-	14		
	15							
	13							
(45)	(81)	(72)	(49)	(50)	(44)	(64)	(52)	
16	-	-	26	-	-	13	14	
19	-	8	15	6	14	4	8	
9	5	8	9	6	7	-	-	
(63)	(79)	(73)	(16)	(54)	(62)	(69)	(36)	
	-	-	21	10	7	13	6	
	-	7	16	12	8	13	12	
21	4	9	12	5	5	10	-	
46								
7	(17)	(80)	(61)	(53)	(38)	(37)		
	36	-	4	9	-	22		
	21	-	3	6	9	26		
	9	-	8	13	13	15		

Legend:

Top figure 1920 enrollment      Middle figure 1930 enrollment  
Lower figure 1940 enrollment

\* 92 pupils were enrolled in these two consolidated districts schools in 1920 (see Biennial Report).

District 22 was organized as a common district in 1920

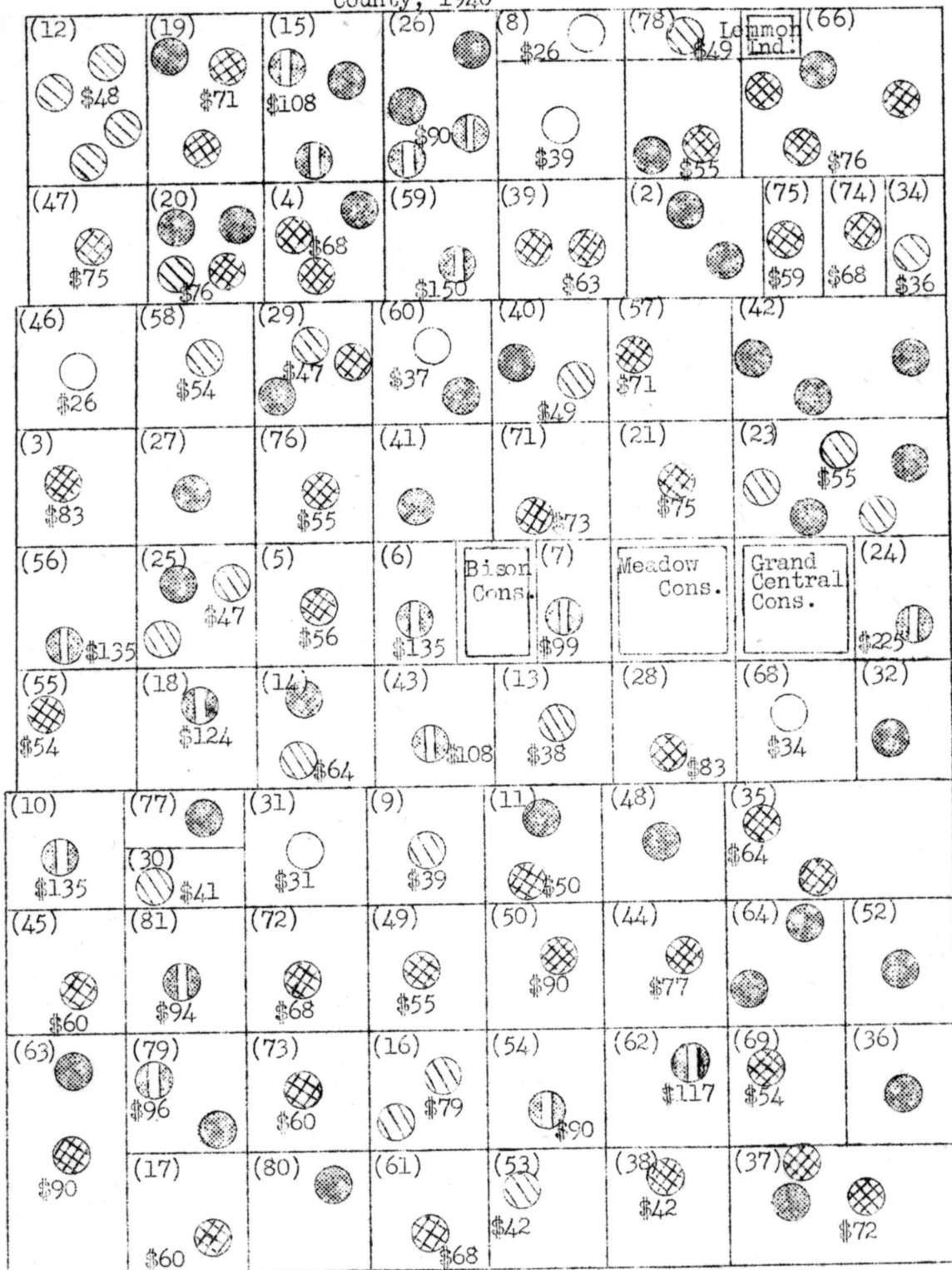
Source: Records of Perkins County Superintendent of Schools

In Perkins county 83 common schools were in operation in 1940, in addition to two independent districts and three consolidated districts.

The definite downward trend in enrollment is evident in Figure 3, which lists the elementary school enrollments of each district for 1920, 1930, and 1940. Of the 76 common school districts of Perkins county, 66 districts dropped in enrollment from 1930 to 1940. Approximately 30 percent of the schools in operation in 1930 were closed in 1940 and approximately three-fourths of the remaining schools were operating with enrollments of ten pupils or less. Only six schools had an enrollment of 16 or more pupils. Between 1930 and 1940 the rural enrollment had dropped from 1496 pupils to 730 pupils. One hundred and twenty schools were in operation in 1920 with an average enrollment of 12.5 pupils. This enrollment, already low for efficient schools, decreased to an average of 8.8 pupils per school in 1940. Further enrollment losses may be expected in the future, unless unforeseen population changes occur.



Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, in Perkins County, 1940



Legend

- Closed school
- 6 - 10 pupils
- 16 or more pupils
- 5 or fewer pupils
- 11 - 15 pupils

Figure in ( ) indicates district number

Figure below circle represents cost per pupil (Average cost per district pupil)

Source: Records of Perkins County Superintendent of Schools

As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Perkins county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Perkins county during the 1939-40 term ranged from \$26 per pupil in District 8 which enrolled 24 pupils and in district 46 which enrolled 21 pupils to \$225 in district 24 which enrolled only two pupils.

Table I (below) indicates that the operation of schools for less than ten pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. Schools with five or fewer pupils enrolled well illustrate this point. The average per pupil cost of schools in this group was \$113.38 as compared with \$31.46, the average cost per pupil of schools where 16 or more pupils were enrolled. In schools of six to ten pupils the average cost per pupil was \$65.98, more than twice as high as the cost per pupil in the schools enrolling 16 or more pupils.

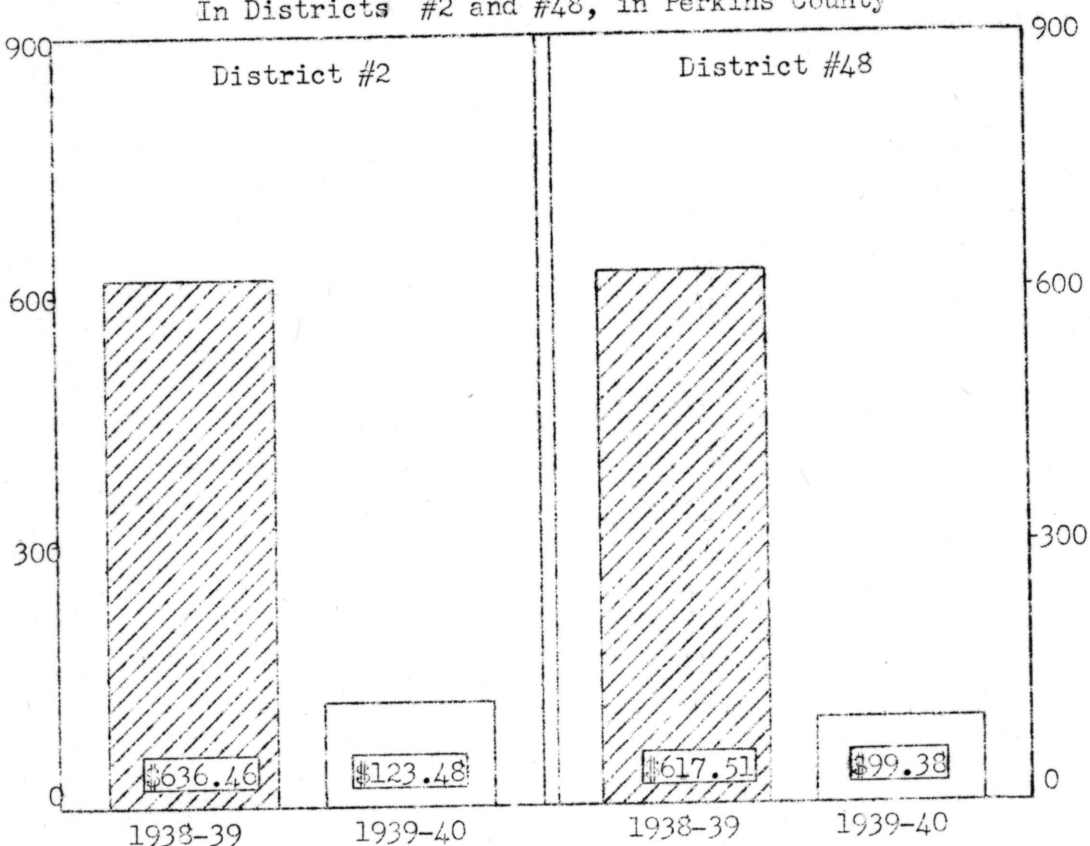
Table 1. Instructional Cost\* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Perkins County, 1940



Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	115	740	\$43,943.50	\$59.38
Closed schools	35	--	--	--
5 or fewer	16	70	7,930.00	113.38
6 - 10 pupils	44	348	22,963.50	65.98
11 - 15 pupils	17	209	9,495.00	45.43
16 or more pupils	6	113	3,555.00	31.46

\* Based on Teachers' salaries only

Source: Records of the Perkins County Superintendent of Schools

Figure 5. Cost of Educating Pupils Before and After Closing The Schools  
In Districts #2 and #48, in Perkins County



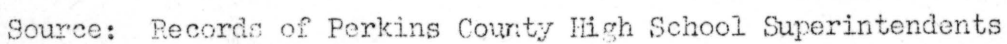
Legend:  Before closing  After closing

Source: Records of Perkins County Superintendent of Schools

To reduce high per pupil costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools during recent years, particularly those with declining enrollments. As previously noted, about 30 percent of the schools in Perkins county have been closed since 1930.

During the 1938-39 school term, school operation costs for district 48 totaled \$617.51. The following year the district school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district with the home district paying their tuition and transportation. That year the cost of educating their elementary pupils including the tuition and transportation payments, were \$99.38 - a saving to the district of \$518.13 over the previous year. A similar saving was made in District 2. During the 1938-39 school term operating costs for this school were \$636.46. The following year, with the school closed it cost the district only \$123.48 to educate its elementary pupils in a neighboring district.

\* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to properly motivate students.



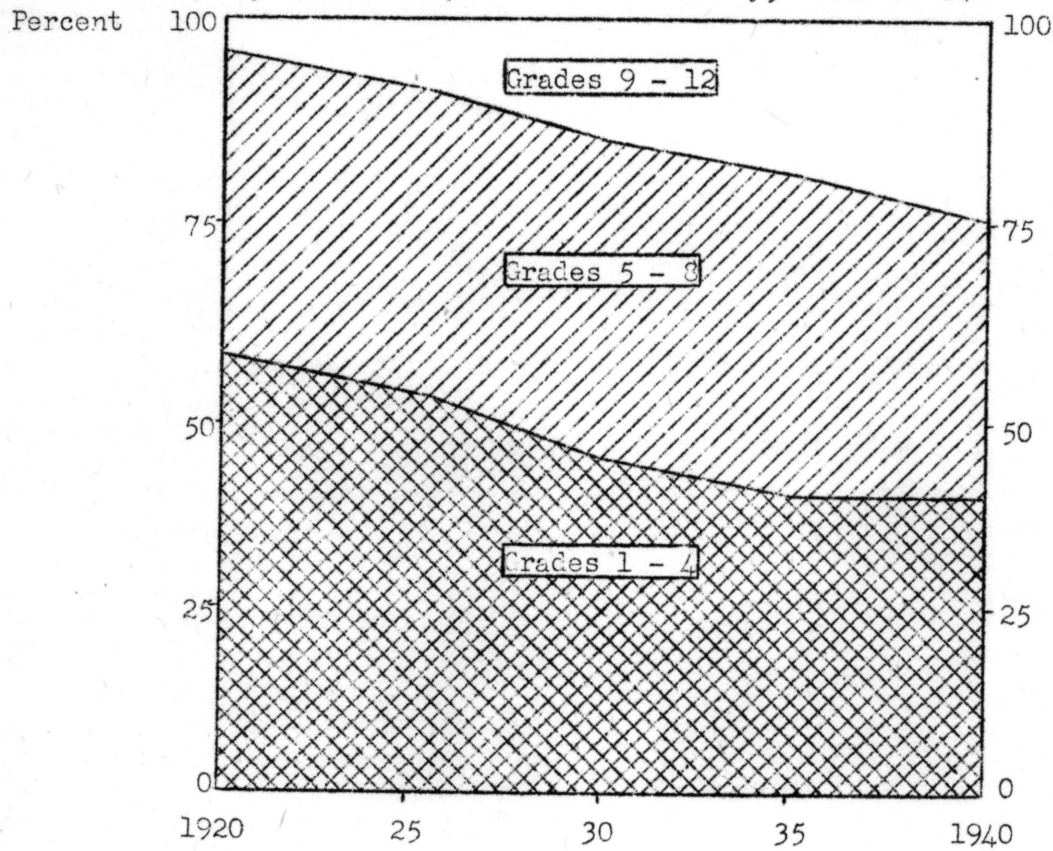


Since 1921, school districts of South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside of the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Perkins county tuition students, numbering 149 in 1940. Twenty-six of these attended high schools outside of the county.

Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, common school districts of Perkins county have adopted the policy of sending their students as tuition pupils to high schools already existing in town and village centers. The adaption of a similar plan to elementary education may be practical to some extent, as elementary enrollments continue to shrink and costs per pupil to mount. Rural schools near independent districts could be closed and the remaining pupils sent to village schools, with the home district paying the tuition and transportation costs. Where distance and lack of good roads make this course impractical the centralized school might be a solution. These plans would have the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the superior educational facilities of larger schools.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in town or rural centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and of sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating, paying tuition and transportation charges as provided by law in case the school to which the pupils are sent is outside the district.

Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments, By Grade Groups in Perkins County, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Perkins county shrank from 54.4 percent to 38.7 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. The explanation of this trend may be found in the fact that birth rates have fallen since 1920. Consequently there have been fewer and fewer pupils each year to enter the first grade. Nineteen and seventenths percent of the pupils enrolled in 1920 were first graders and 12.9 percent were eighth graders, whereas in 1940 the proportions had changed to 9.7 and 8.3 percent respectively. With the greatly reduced number of persons under six years of age, it is obvious that elementary enrollments will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate trend should be reversed.

Figure 7 also shows that the high school enrollment was more than four times as large in 1940 as in 1920, increasing from 5.3 percent to 23.9 percent. This trend may be explained by the fact that an increasingly greater number of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table II. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Grades, 1920 - 1940.

Year	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	19.7	13.8	10.5	10.3	10.0	10.0	7.3	12.9	2.5	1.3	.9	.9
1925	15.8	12.6	11.3	10.4	11.1	10.1	11.1	9.0	3.0	2.4	1.5	1.7
1930	12.4	9.6	10.6	9.8	9.8	11.6	11.0	10.2	5.6	4.1	3.2	2.1
1935	12.0	9.1	8.6	7.8	10.8	10.8	10.3	11.8	5.4	5.1	3.9	4.4
1940	9.7	9.2	10.7	9.1	9.7	10.2	9.2	8.3	6.4	7.5	5.2	4.8

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935, 1940.

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How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully  
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

The county-wide system exists in the four unorganized counties of South Dakota, Shannon, Todd, Washington and Washabaugh. Under this plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.

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